

THE BALANCE SHEET

Consistently good customer service is one of the best assets your company can have. When customers are treated well, the organization benefits. Likewise when customers are treated poorly, the organization suffers — and you waste time offering damage control. Worse yet, the valued customer says nothing to you, but a great deal to others and potentially goes elsewhere. As managers and supervisors, it is important to recognize the far-reaching value of good service to all of your customers.

The Golden Rule of Customer Service

Like everyone, you have probably experienced poor customer service at various times in your life. Chances are, it impacted your opinion of the organizations where it occurred and how frequently — if at all — you bought their products or services. Now think about the times you've received good customer service and how positive those experiences were for you. Treating others the way we ourselves want to be treated is the golden rule of customer service.

Elements of Good Customer Service

- Prompt and courteous attention
- Helpful and clear assistance
- Positive body language including good eye contact
- Focused attention
- Respectful behavior at all times

Recognizing Your Customers

As a manager or supervisor, ask yourself, “who are my customers?” Most people begin by naming business contacts, clients, prospects and vendors. However if the list stops here, you are missing a critical component of your customer base — internal customers. These include everyone you interact with in your organization on a day-to-day basis — peers, senior management, direct staff, other support staff and all other employees.

Providing excellent service to internal customers is just as important as to external customers. And poor service to your fellow employees is equally as damaging. Treating internal customers badly erodes morale, contributes to turnover, causes complaints and lessens productivity — all of which cost an organization dearly.

It's really common sense when you think about it. In general, people respond most favorably to polite, courteous treatment no matter what the circumstance or message.

Responding To Internal Customers

It's not uncommon to treat internal customers differently than external customers. Often, you don't recognize their vital role in the success of your organization. In addition, many people cite workplace challenges as a reason for providing marginal or poor internal customer service. These issues include:

- Production stress such as busy workloads or tight deadlines
- People stress such as interpersonal conflicts, communication breakdowns or dealing with difficult people
- Outside personal stress that is brought into the workplace

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Such workplace stressors affect how we deal with our internal customers and confirm the importance of good self-care so we can dedicate more time to perfecting our customer service skills — both for internal and external customers.

All Behavior Has An Impact

Through his research, Professor P.M. Forni, co-founder of the Civility Project at Johns Hopkins University, has found that “even small indignities (such as changing the room temperature without asking, or not refilling the office coffee pot) and minor cruelties (such as snubbing a co-worker or not inviting someone to a function when everyone else has been invited) take a toll on all employees — managers and workers alike. They add to the burden of stress and fatigue that is already present in the workplace and they have real consequences on the everyday lives of people. This is especially true when incivilities involve a fundamental lack of respect, such as eavesdropping, being unnecessarily loud, not acknowledging colleagues in the hallway, and gossiping with intent to harm.”

As a manager or supervisors, internal customers will often contact you when they have a problem, seeking advice or help. While frequently, you are not the cause of or even a contributor to the specific situation, how you respond directly impacts the outcome. Providing attention and assistance shows the customer that you care about his or her feelings and want to help. This positive reinforcement alone helps to alleviate the intensity of the issue, calm the customer and lead to resolution.

Understanding What Upsets People

People who are upset tend to have little patience, react strongly to perceptions and become increasingly intolerant when challenged. It takes unique skills to best deal with them. By maintaining a calm and respectful demeanor, offering help and not taking comments or attacks personally, you can help find an acceptable outcome. Remember that your primary goal is to remain positive and up beat when you are speaking with a customer. Even when you need to deliver news that is less than desirable, there is always a way to convey your message in a pleasant manner.

As the adage goes, we have two ears and only one mouth, because we should listen twice as much as we speak. Thorough listening translates into thorough understanding. Once we identify the concern in a clear manner, we can explore alternatives, present options to the appropriate people and come to agree on a choice.

Phrases to avoid:

I don't know...
We can't do that...
You have to...
Why are you upset?...
You don't understand...
I'm new....
That's not our policy...
I know how you feel...

Instead try:

Let me check on that...
Can we agree on...
Help me understand ...
Tell me more...
How can we solve this?
I can...
Thanks for bringing this to my attention...

If in spite of your best efforts to provide good customer service you continue to have an upset customer, you should:

- Acknowledge the problem
- Stay in control
- Focus on what you can do
- Ask open-ended questions
- Use polite repetition
- Use the customer's name
- And if you need help – call your supervisor, Human Resources or Symmetry

Customer Service begins and ends with a positive attitude. Common courtesy, good problem-solving skills and recognizing that internal customers are also critical will help both you and your company succeed. For more information or assistance, please contact Symmetry at **(800) 236-7905** or **(414) 256-4800**.



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